LIVING AT THE CROSSROADS

Explorations in Race, Nationality, Sexuality, and Gender

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GRADUATION DAY, Afro-American Studies Program, 1991: I remind myself that there are ruptures in my being an out lesbian on campus. My colleagues and superiors know I'm a dyke, as do some, but clearly not all, of our students. Two of my former students—both campus activists, both proponents of a distinctly masculine cultural nationalism of the 1990s—launch into a tirade against queers. One young man worries about what to do about the fags, and suggests putting them (me?) on a spaceship bound for outer space. He also ruminates on the possibility of a few good gay-bashings. I am disarmed and afraid, and do not name my queerness. As I question their hostility toward lesbians and gays, our conversation lurches from pillar to post: they inform me that queers are a detriment to our race, that "they" are selfish, unnatural, anathema to the building of a strong black nation.[1] My question begins to crystallize: why is heterosexuality so central to these young men's notions of blackness?

A play day in the park, a few weeks prior: I am playing with our youngest son, the brown-skinned child of my partner Elizabeth and her former husband, a Senegalese national. We share the play area with several neighborhood white mothers and children who are having their weekly park rendezvous. I am at first puzzled when the mothers ignore my greetings and efforts to make eye contact; after all, we often have seen one another in the neighborhood. As their conversation turns to the difficulties of finding and keeping "good help," my confusion evaporates into clarity: these women believed I was Elizabeth's child-care provider, and as such, clearly not a candidate for inclusion in a peer-based and class-specific conversation about the shortage of quality nannies.

The above experiences served as distinctive markers in my ongoing effort to explore the nexus of race and sexual orientation. Together they provide the entry points for this essay, which begins with a "coming out" story. My focus is the dialogues that articulated heterosexuality's centrality to student understandings of "blackness," the racialization of sexual discourse, and the notion that homosexuality is a "white thing."[2] I argue that black queers interrupt a longing for a stigma-free black sexuality, a longing forged in the fires of racist ideology. This essay posits that racialized discourses lend a specificity to some African-American heterosexisms. For some African Americans, the issue is not simply sexual orientation, but "blackness" itself.

My days in the park inform the second part of the essay, preliminary musings on racialized readings of black-white lesbian relationships. Strangers often construe my lesbian relationship as other than it is. I suggest that current and historical contours of white supremacy inform the readings of Elizabeth's and my partnership. Although the particularities of their readings vary a bit from encounter to encounter, our day-to-day experiences provide living testimony to the interpretive legacy of white supremacy in a heterosexualized life world. Straight African Americans who know us as partners are sometimes accepting, sometimes openly troubled by my commitment to a white woman. It is the latter—my being viewed as a race traitor—that I address herein.

BEING SEEN

The University of Maryland is a formerly all-white public institution that now has a larger African-American population than most traditionally white universities. The black student population includes more than two thousand African Americans, who have created a host of academic, cultural, social, and political organizations. They are a varied lot, and joined on campus by more than sixty tenured and tenure-track black faculty and more than one thousand black staff and administrators.

There were few out gay and lesbian faculty in the spring of 1992; those who were out are white. I speculated that the absence of visible

sequent issues of both the *Eclipse* and the *Black Explosion*, the campus community debated the issue. Each paper published letters and editorials from those who condemned queers and from those who castigated heterosexism.

BEING BLACK

I take as a given the pervasiveness of racial representations in U.S. culture, and indeed throughout the Western world. I understand these representations to be nonstatic, shifting, contested, gendered, and class-specific.[4] Narratives of black pathology are one of racist culture's most enduring legacies. These narratives are both gendered and fraught with representations of black sexuality. Thus, any discussion that engages popular notions of black sexuality must reckon with racism's larger story of black dysfunction.

Western racist discourses routinely construct "blackness" as a problematic sign and ontological position. In so doing, the architects of cultural and (social) scientific racism historically have represented black communities, black families, and black bodies as the bearers of stigma, disease, danger, violence, social pathology, and hypersexuality. In this part of the essay, I am particularly interested in the racialized narratives that address black families and sexuality. Black families have long functioned as markers in the public imagination: they generally signify and manifest a morally problematic sexually agency, a cultural degeneracy. The conventional social scientific wisdom is clear: "the problem" is that so much black sexuality and kinship formation transgresses the boundaries of married (and therefore healthy) heterosexuality.[5]

However, social managers and engineers do not have a monopoly on the generation and propagation of deeply gendered familial tropes. In their musings on the well-being of "the black nation," African-American nationalists have long invoked family metaphors. Martin Delany—often identified as the father of black nationalism—was among the earliest nationalists to embrace an explicitly patriarchal domestic ideal. Writing in the nineteenth century, Delany believed that masculine authority was essential for the well-being of the exiled black nation (Gilroy, 23–24). In what follows I will suggest that family tropes are vital today, and function in part to circulate specific notions of racial authenticity.

Today's African-American college students have come of age in a political culture that regularly recycles two signs of black dysfunction: antisocial black (male) criminality and (female) sexuality are the behavioral manifestations of contemporary black cultural chaos. Scholarly and journalistic treatises on the underclass anchor contemporary race talk, and speak the language that distinguishes the aberrant underclass from the striving middle class.[6] As long as they aver affirmative action and other race-based policies, the middle classes are potential (though suspect) members of the community of citizens. In sharp contrast, the behaviorally deviant underclass compels vigilant monitoring, discipline, and control.[7]

A recent magazine article retells the story of black families in trouble. The August 30, 1993, issue of *Newsweek* premiered a lengthy lamentation on the decline of marriage among African Americans. The authors of "Endangered Family" make much of noting the ubiquity of black family crisis: declining marriage rates and out-of-wedlock births are not restricted to the black poor. Across the board, African-American men and women are at odds with one another:

> Black men say black women are "Sapphires," trying to dominate, explains Harvard psychologist Alvin Poussaint, referring to the wife of Kingfish in "Amos 'n' Andy," who epitomized the bitchy, bossy black woman. But Boston anchorwoman Liz Walker believes that many black men mistake self-reliance for high-handedness. (*Newsweek*, 20)

The spectacle of a conflicted black heterosexuality saturates the magazine's pages, and the theme is familiar: there are too many female-headed households. Social scientists are left to weigh the relative importance of structural and cultural explanations. Author Michel Ingrassia summons the authority of empirical social science to trash the notion that female-headed families, whatever their "cause," are potentially viable and life-enhancing, as good as "the nuclear unit":

> The evidence comes down solidly on the side of marriage. By every measure—economic, social, educational—the statistics conclude that two parents living together are better than one. (21)

Readers familiar with this narrative are not surprised to (re)learn that African-American women are the primary carriers of black familial pathology—makers of the homes that nurture violent black sons and daughters seemingly in rebellion against male power. In Valerie Martin's home in Washington, D.C., the signs of trouble are already apparent:

> Latoyia, who's going into fifth grade, gets A's and B's, but this articulate girl who seems so calm at home was suspended three times last year for getting into fights. George . . . had to repeat first grade. He seems only mildly rambunctious, but Valerie says he's getting hard to discipline. (18)

Ms. Martin's three children have three different (and nameless) fathers. Her relationships with the fathers faltered when Latoyia's got bossy and George's started to "act stupid." Valerie's story is familiar and comforting to readers already attuned and receptive to cultural explanations of black distress: the welfare-dependent single mother embodies and reproduces heterosexual confusion in poor, urban African-American communities.

Ms. Martin has her counterparts among working black women not receiving AFDC. Here, to, we find single mothers, raising their children, struggling to make ends meet. Sylvia Berry works for wages outside the home, but the consequences for her son are nonetheless dire. Marcus was "stuck in solitary" while his mother worked: his home is a prison, because his neighborhood (the Shaw district, again in the nation's capital) is unsafe. Restless and bored, he played in school and earned low grades.

Black students read these stories—they bring them to me, offerings that, for them, personalize William J. Wilson's thesis of a crisis-ridden, aberrant underclass. Many Maryland undergraduates do not know this narrative's genealogy. They experience it as a new and powerful truth. Some read it as a call for a new movement, one that strives for black economic independence. For others these narratives are a comforting palliative, stories that help them differentiate themselves from the "others"—the hated and feared African-American underclass. When compared to the Martins and Berrys, most of their families emerge as shining examples of domestic bliss. For yet another group these texts concretize a class-specific missionary zeal—here are the lumpen folk to whom they can offer the gift of racial uplift. Whatever the particular reading, many students weave these stories into their customized brands of social conservatism.

Wahneema Lubiano discusses the power of these stories, the saliency of the meanings deployed and circulated in the juxtaposition of welfare and working mothers. Her analysis of the gendered pathology discourse takes as an entry point the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill hearings:

> . . . the flip side of the pathological welfare queen . . . is the black lady, the one whose disproportionate overachievement stands for black cultural strangeness and who ensures the underachievement of "the black male" in the lower classes because "ours [the U.S.] is a society which presumes male leadership in private and public affairs." (Lubiano, 335—quotation from the *Moynihan Report*, 1965)

Lubiano catalogues the narratives mobilized by Hill's opponents: they sought to discredit her professional status by invoking affirmative action, and/or by casting her as the living embodiment of a spurned/lesbian womanhood. She is most compelling in her interpretation of the development of black hostility to Hill:

> Blackness, as an abstraction, did battle for Thomas because few people actually belonging to the group "black" or "African-American" [here referred to by Lubiano as a taken-for-granted social fact] would have gone to war on behalf of Thomas the corrupt judge, Thomas the bigot, Thomas the incompetent head of the EEOC. But for Thomas the black male victim of "Sapphire"—black female emasculation and betrayer of black men and carrier of black family pathology—well, the African American legions would and did rise to battle against her. Out of the ooze of his past record climbed Thomas, the *real black* thing. (345)

Lubiano's analysis presumes that many African Americans affirm the racialized and gendered narratives of black pathology. To the extent that she is right, Lubiano provides us a means to conceptualize the stakes in black reluctance to embrace gays and lesbians in our own communities.

In the ideologies of contemporary cultural nationalism, families are *the* sanctioned site for the reproduction of authentic racial ethnic culture. Healthy families are monogamous, dedicated to masculine authority, and affirm traditional gender roles; unwell families include sexually promiscuous adults and foster female dominance. Recalling "Endangered Family," women are the primary reproductive agents in this narrative, and their dysfunctional families spawn a crisis-ridden racial community populated by carriers of a disabled masculinity. However, redemption is possible:

> . . . the crisis of black masculinity can be fixed. It is to be repaired by instituting appropriate forms of masculine and male authority, intervening in the family to rebuild the race. (Gilroy, "Family Affair," 312)

Like Sapphire, black queers betray the quest for healthy black families, a regulated and normalized black sexuality. Whether viewed as the products of broken families or betrayers of family life together, black gays and lesbians are a potential anathema to straight African Americans whose resistance to racist narratives inspires them to "clean up" images of black sexuality. When these African Americans publicly reject homosexuality, they do so in a social context that persistently regenerates public images and discourses of sexual perversion and familial damage. For those seeking to sanitize and normalize popular perceptions of black sexuality, the public affirmations of queerness—a category marked with the stains of hypersexuality, promiscuity, and danger—can only serve to further the stigmatization of blackness.[8]

Racist narratives that pathologize our families and sexualities diminish heterosexual privilege within black communities. Black heterosexuality is constructed as unnatural, already beyond God's law and nature's logic. Accordingly, the redemption of African-American families requires the harnessing and disciplining of black sexual behavior. Hypersexual heterosexuals can, in principle, change or be changed. As noted above, the solution is a communal recommitment to the male-dominated and sexually restrained domestic unit. However, queerness is not so easily reigned in —indeed, it is a pathology that totally destabilizes the parameters of social life and thwarts the building of a strong black nation.

Many African Americans have expended copious amounts of energy resisting and transforming the discourses that pathologize heterosexual black families and kinship systems.[9] This essay questions the contours of that resistance: do they reify black families and sexualities, or historicize them as complex, diverse, and flexible? My contention is that many cultural nationalist projects reject this complexity. Thus, efforts to affirm "blackness" generate a contradictory narrative: although nationalists seek to remove stigma, they offer in its place a terrifyingly rigid and tyrannical notion of "family"—one that collaborates with and consents to normative and demonizing notions of race, community, and culture.

Insofar as they reinscribe rigid boundaries of blackness, cultural nationalist efforts to destigmatize display at least three noteworthy tendencies. The first is an identification with Africa that is, as cultural critic Paul Gilroy notes, both partial and selective ("Family Affair," 307). For example, Nathan and Julia Hare's advocacy of polygamous families idealizes cowife cooperation and male support, but "ignores cross-generational conflict and intrafamily rivalry" (White, 75). In a similar spirit of obliteration, nationalists who embrace the autonomous, monogamous, conjugal heterosexual family as the domestic ideal suppress their indebtedness to European and Euro-American nationalist notions of proper family life. Their vision of kinship differs radically from the consanguinity and polygamy practiced by African-America's ethnic ancestors (Sudarkasa).

The second tendency is the aforementioned essentialism—the notion that there is one true African diaspora consciousness and cultural system, one black ontology that crosses state boundaries and ethnic groups. Molefi Asante's *Afrocentricity* prominently argues this point, and is also unrelenting in its homophobia. In her essay "Postmodern Blackness" bell hooks speaks to the genealogy of essentialist longings in African America:

> The unwillingness to critique essentialism on the part of many African Americans is rooted in the fear that it will cause folks to lose sight of the specific history and experience of African-

> Americans and the unique sensibilities and culture that arise from that experience. . . . There is a radical difference between a repudiation of the idea that there is a black "essence" and recognition of the way black identity has been specifically constituted in the experience of exile and struggle. (*Yearning*, 29)

This same tendency obliterates both the historical specificities of African-American culture and cultural diversity within Africa.

A third current runs steadily through many nationalist polemics: the notion that black queerness is fundamentally an epiphenomenal consequence of white supremacy (Madhubuti, 73–74; Welsing, 86). The invocation of white racism constructs a mythical and asocial queerness. The gays and lesbians who stalk their pages are not members of black churches, clubs, schools, and neighborhoods (they are, of course, products of dysfunctional homes). It is here that Lubiano's analysis lends itself to a deeper analogy: just an abstraction of "blackness" as victim rallied community sympathy for Clarence Thomas, so an abstraction of queerness enables the cultural nationalist line.

Consider the extent to which many straight African Americans partake of "don't ask, don't tell," offering acceptance of queers in return for the silence, shame, and terror of the closet. Lesbians and gays who consent to this form of heterosexism are not so easily viewed as beyond the boundaries of "blackness." However, when recast as marked carriers of white oppression, these same folk can elicit black condemnation.

In locating the genesis of black homosexual outside black communities, both cultural nationalists and those not so specifically identified restore the possibility of a normal, healthy black sexuality. Restoration of health requires recovery from the corrosive influences of white supremacy that have weakened heterosexual bonds (and therefore male supremacy) in African-American communities. The alleged consequences of weakened heterosexual bonds are numerous and pernicious, but the allegations of black male emasculation and familial breakdown resonate most powerfully within this context.

The stigmatization of black families and sexualities has been and remains a crucial component in the constitution of black consciousness.

Unlike their white counterparts, African Americans live without the benefit of an assumed familial and sexual wellness. Individual white families can and do manifest numerous and myriad behaviors, but dominant narratives rarely read such events as revelation of an intrinsic and pervasive group cultural chaos. The cultural presumption of black sexual deviance nurtures African-American predispositions to keep at arm's length those individuals and behaviors that may reconfirm aberration. It sustains selective and convenient appropriations of Africa, essentialism, and the white causality model. Thus, racialized discourse of families and sexuality profoundly mediate the meanings of queerness for many African Americans. The stakes are not merely homosexuality, but blackness itself.

Black lesbian scholar E. Frances White also speaks to the nexus of sexuality and race. In a recent essay White reflects upon her attendance of a Sister Souljah concert at Hampshire College (Harper, Cerullo, and White). Souljah is the sole female member of the rap group Public Enemy and became the object of national press attention during the 1992 presidential campaign. President-to-be Bill Clinton chastized her imagining and calling for a week where armed blacks used their guns on whites instead of on one another.

White describes Souljah's performance as one that scripted racialized roles for the audience. Asians were cast as all-powerful enemies of black people; Latinos "could have a role as long as they identified unconditionally with African Americans" (White, 35). At the center stood African Americans, and Sister Souljah was there to instruct them in the means to achieving authentic blackness. It was this process that began to unsettle some students. In proscribing the parameters of blackness, Souljah began to step on more than a few toes. Her injunction against interracial relationships disturbed the students who were either involved in such relationships or children of such unions. But it was her homophobia that really rocked the collective boat.

White proposes that Souljah's heterosexism revealed to students the source of her discursive power: ". . . the power of this performance depended upon attacks on group after group, until virtually everybody had some part of their identity marginalized" (35). Souljah was uncompromising in her position that a strong black community requires strong hetero-

sexual bonds. Listen to White's explanation of the centrality of Souljah's heterosexism:

> One of the reasons that it was so central was that it built on a long tradition of discourse on race that we see in African American nationalist discourse. Afrocentric discourse, and even racist white discourse. It is a way of seeing "The Problem" in the Black community as one of failed family bonds—failed heterosexual bonds, in particular. You can read anyone from Ron Karenga to Patrick Moynihan, from Haki Madhubuti to Bill Moyers, you will find that the problem with the Black community is that we have weak heterosexual bonds. Thus the building blocks for a strong community don't include welfare dependent families, single parent female-headed households, and especially they don't include gay, lesbian, and bisexual family members. (35–36)

White closes by noting that the postconcert debates demonstrated the disruptive powers of sexuality. Many students rejected the notion that "queer" is a white thing.

BEING SEEN IN BLACK AND WHITE

Sistah Souljah clearly had no time for black queers. We are cast out of the fold of blackness, a part of the racial-national problem, not its solution. According to E. Fran White's report, Souljah also banished blacks with white partners from the kingdom. This moment in her performance serves as a pointed reminder that interracial relationships remain a flash point in many black communities. Straight African Americans have long struggled over the racial credentials of blacks with white partners. Black-white relationships frequently have served as the site for the contestation of the meaning of blackness.

The vast majority of public conversations about interracial relationships take heterosexuals as their subjects. Among African Americans, questions of racial loyalty and race-gender ideology figure prominently in

the discussion, and the prototypical relationship of concern is that between a black man and a white woman. The questions that often inform the conversations are familiar: To what extent is his choice confirmation of racist and sexist notions of beauty, femininity, and womanhood? Is her choice of him and his choice of her rooted in the titillation provided by the forbidden, more pleasurable and exotic sexual "other"? Is she, for him, a symbolic manifestation of his longing for a status often denied in a racist and patriarchal social order? Is he black-identified?[10]

Black and white gays and lesbians are generally nonsubjects in straight folk's cultural meditations on eros, love, and intimacy across racial lines. In those few moments where the topic has come up in my presence, the interrogators are more likely straight women than men, and the questions posed reflect the complexities of racial politics and identification across and within sexual orientations. Several of the men who have questioned my choice of a partner were political allies on the left who concluded that a white partner signifies a slavish and uncritical rejoicing in all things culturally "white." For these leftist cultural and political nationalists, it was my partner's race, not my work, that was the final determinant of political legitimacy. The verdict: not black enough.

Nationalist paternalism remains outrageous and oppressive, although familiar. I am reminded of similar admonitions regarding my feminism at earlier points in my life. Critical conversations about and struggles against sexism, I was and am still told, are evidence of white blight and anathema to black self-determination. I continue to note the extent to which some leftist cultural nationalists are at home in their willingness to proscribe the contours of sexually correct blackness.

However, I had no such reference point for the questions posed and the pain expressed by straight black women. The first time a straight sister asked why I was with a white woman, I assumed that this was the standard racial authenticity test. Yet this same woman affirmed my regard for black lives. The second time a group of black women raised "the question," I was working with them in a black studies context, and my commitment to progressive, antiracist, and feminist politics was evident. In each case, my questioners were more troubled by my partner's race than by my sexual orientation. Why am I not with a black woman?

This time, clarification came via a recollection of that which I had initially overlooked: these straight women were, in effect, identifying with and speaking on behalf of the black lesbians who were not my partners. As such, they were empathetically, and across lines of sexual orientation, articulating the pain of rejection. Since they are not lesbians, we could not, of course, be lovers. Nonetheless, this concrete reality did not impede these straight women from reading my relationship with Elizabeth as rejection of black women—a rejection of myself, a rejection of them.

These racialized and gendered readings of black and white women together occurred when my queerness was a known, a given. When my sexual orientation is unknown and heterosexuality is assumed, an entirely different reading surfaces. In these contexts Elizabeth and I have learned how a black and white lesbian couple can elicit very explicit readings of public interracial togetherness. Our invisibility as lesbians unveils the assumption that interracial relationships must inevitably and predictably be a reenactment of white supremacy.

My experience in the park recalls this country's historically gendered legacy of African-American servitude. It is only within the past thirty years that black women have collectively moved out of domestic work and into the clerical and service occupations of the service economy. Many African Americans born after World War II have parents or grandparents who worked in white homes as housekeepers and providers of child care. Their child-care needs and solutions did not warrant public debate and concern. The much-needed and long-overdue public debates about working women's unmet need for reliable and affordable child care is all too recent, and coincides with the increase in married white women's labor-force participation.

When political and policy elites openly address these issues, the race and class divisions among women loom large. In 1992 we collectively learned that President Clinton's executive cabinet appointees hired undocumented women workers of color because they could not find U.S. citizens to care for their children. Thus, they continued the long-standing tradition of employing their housekeepers and nannies in unprotected labor markets. In 1994 and 1995, the denizens of welfare reform insist that recipients of AFDC enter the labor market, but refuse to address their long-term needs for child care, health care, education, and a living wage. It can only be a matter of time before the policy wizards suggest that states send welfare mothers into professional homes—another fortuitous example of the market economy's miraculous ability to reproduce racialized class relations.

Given this historical context, it is not that surprising that middle-class white women of suburban Maryland assumed that I worked for Elizabeth. My casual empiricism suggests that although few of them employ African-American women in their homes, a fair number employ African nationals, Latinas, and Afro-Caribbean women. The globalized economy has generated new cadres of child-care workers but has preserved North-South political economic hierarchies. It is in this context that our neighbors defined Elizabeth's and my identities and relationship. The possibility that we might be partnered lesbians remains unthinkable. What was imagined is a racialized class provisioning of child care.

Thus, in the presence of our children, I often am read as their paid care provider. In their absence the interpretive lens nonetheless retains its power. I recall for example, our experience at the University of Richmond in the fall of 1992. A few campus progressives organized an oppositional speak-out the night before the presidential debate to be held at their campus. They invited me, I accepted, and Elizabeth joined me. At the hotel desk, I said, "Reservation for Dr. Rhonda Williams, please." The clerk, a young African-American woman, completed her paperwork, then handed the registration form to Elizabeth, saying, "Here you go, Dr. Williams." Elizabeth handed the paper to me, and said to the clerk, while gesturing in my direction, "*She* is Dr. Williams."

We were stunned by this conversation and subsequently discussed at length the racial mediations that structured the exchange. Once again, in the absence of an overt expression or articulation of intimacy, the clerk assumed our "straightness." What we found truly remarkable was this young black women's presumption that I was not asking for my own reservation—I could not be "Dr. Williams." Rather, in that moment the clerk imagined that I worked for Elizabeth in some capacity, and was speaking *for* her in that capacity. In this young black woman's experience, blacks and whites appear together at her desk as employee and employer. In the

collision of class and race identification, our being social peers was just as inconceivable as our being social queers.

BEING POLITICAL

The Hampshire students who rejected Souljah's efforts to essentialize race had their counterparts at the University of Maryland. Several African-American students—all male—addressed the black student population on the dangers of a narrowly confined blackness. David Terry opined that "homosexuality is not a burdening problem in the black community. . . . If there is a problem within the black community, it is on the part of 'we' the heterosexual members" (Terry, 2). Timothy Dixon lamented the "small-mindedness" and "stupidity" of his peers (Dixon, 2). Two young men came to my office to share with me their personal support and to let me know that they were taking up the queer cause in the dormitories.

I noted the absence of young women visitors, the dearth of young women who challenge heterosexism in the black papers. I am reminded of Makeda Silvera's ruminations on some black women's fear of losing the heterosexual privilege, the only privilege many know (Silvera, 1992). I wonder to what extent masculine privilege empowered the young men who publically affirmed my sexual orientation. Would they have felt equally at liberty to speak out if the queer in question was a gay brother?

As one semester passes into the next, I regularly encounter students responding to the news of my queerness. First-year students hear it in the large lecture course, and/or receive a briefing from their older peers. Those who frequent the Afro-American studies office witness a small community of black folks struggling to embrace (sometimes with more ease than others) the diversity of our collective. The departmental space provides many students an example of how they might live and work in principled solidarity with their queer brothers and sisters. They see professors, staff, and students affirming our "pomo-homo" family.[11]

Like their elders, some students have greater difficulty with Elizabeth's whiteness than with my queerness. For these students, my having a white partner contradicts my antiracist teaching, research, and politics. Whether

straight or gay, they feel betrayed. Many have never known or loved a principled antiracist white person; many do not believe such persons exist. I am reminded of the ongoing necessity for cultural and political works that might expand their racial imaginations.

NOTES

I thank Elizabeth Seydi, Katie King, M. V. Lee Badgett, Wahneema Lubiano, and the editorial collective of the Center for Advanced Feminist Studies at the University of Minnesota for insightful comments.

1. This paragraph employs a diversity of self-referential terms: lesbian, dyke, queerness. My use of these terms has shifted over the years, and not in some ideologically recognizable pattern. My current penchant for "queer" reflects my delight in the term's definitional fuzziness, its overdetermination. I draw inspiration from Phillip Brian Harper's assertion that "queer includes within it a necessarily expansive impulse" (Harper, Cerullo, and White, 30), and Oscar Montero's proposition that "Queer theory skirts identity, sometimes literally, and brings other identities, ethnic, racial, and national, into play" (Montero, 17).
2. In their 1981 dialogue, Barbara Smith and Beverly Smith previewed some of the issues raised here. Barbara Smith suggests that racist sexual stereotypes shape homophobia in black communities. Beverly Smith conjectures that racism's dichotomies give black folks the option of coding lesbianism white. This essay revisits these issues and seeks to extend and amplify their earlier observations (Smith and Smith, 124).
3. Simmons (1991) concisely and critically reviews cultural nationalist positions on black homosexuality.
4. The literature on racial representations, racial meanings, and the racializations of western political economies and cultures continues to grow. For important examples, see Omi and Winant, Gooding-Williams, Butler, Goldberg, Christian, hooks, and Jewell.
5. The academic year 1994–95 marks the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of Daniel P. Moynihan's *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. Now known as the Moynihan Report, this monograph popularized the notion that slavery had created a Negro-American subculture that is matriarchal and therefore pathological. According to Moynihan and his disciples, it is this familial dysfunction that impedes black social development, and not contemporary forms of economic and cultural racism. Sociologist William J. Wilson's 1987 treatise *The Truly Disadvantaged* affirmed the prevalence of pathology among the black urban poor, but argued that dein-

dustrialization, not slavery, is the source of female-headed households (i.e., the loss of manufacturing jobs for high school–educated men devastated the employment possibilities for those same men, resulting in a decline in marriage rates). Challenges to Moynihan and Wilson abound. Reed (1990) provides a solid contemporary example.

6. Wilson (1987) focused much underclass debate in the late 1980s and early 1990s. For a compelling discussion of "the underclass" as a racialized and gendered ideological discourse, see Reed (1990).
7. Dumm (1993) discusses the intensification of state monitoring and control of urban black America.
8. I thank Elizabeth Seydi for articulating this contradiction so clearly in our conversations about sexuality and race and thereby sending me in the directions developed in this essay.
9. In this context "kin" are a group of people who consider themselves family or relatives. The rules for defining kin vary widely across cultures, time, and place but often imply notions of responsibility and obligation.
10. Writers speaking from radically divergent perspectives will nonetheless converge on these questions. Feminist bell hooks and leftist philosopher Cornel West reflect upon these themes in *Breaking Bread* (Boston: South End, 1991, 114–17). Their conversation explores how our white supremacist culture's affirmation of whiteness mediates male (and female) notions of beauty and femininity. Nathan and Julia Hare similarly explore at length black men's collective valorization of white/light skin and women (*Crisis in Black Sexual Politics* [San Francisco: Black Think Tank, 1989], 69–77).
11. Gay and black, Brian Freeman, Bernard Branner, and Eric Gupton cowrote *Fierce Love*, their collection of stories on sex, life, and love. They premiered their show in January 1991 at Josie's in San Francisco. Freeman's boyfriend dubbed the trio "Pomo Afro Homos" (as in postmodern African-American, and homosexual), a name embraced by many in the queer media (Freeman, 59). Their performance group and others like them bring black queers out of the closet and into the light.

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RETHINKING VERNACULAR CULTURE

Black Religion and Race Records in the 1920s and 1930s

■

Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham

IF BLACK RELIGIOUS CULTURE in its varied beliefs and practices has fostered bright and shining stars such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Marian Anderson, Aretha Franklin, Jesse Jackson, and Cornel West, then as this list of names suggests, black religious culture has played a significant role in the contestation of ideologies in African-American communities. This contestation occurs between the middle class and working class, and it also occurs within the working class itself. Unfortunately, the trend in recent scholarship has not given the religious culture of the working class the attention it deserves. Some of the most imaginative and analytically sophisticated studies tend to privilege the secular life of black working-class communities. Such studies often draw upon the "race records" of the 1920s and 1930s, linking blues records with socioeconomic processes of migration and urbanization. They focus on the lyrics of the blues and the lives of blues singers as emblematic of sexual freedom, iconoclastic values, and an overall culture of resistance to the hegemony of middle-class ideology.[1] Implicitly, if not explicitly, the blues is deemed the "authentic" signifier of African-American culture.[2] Blues culture, working-class culture, and "blackness" become virtually synonymous. The religious culture of the working poor, when visible at all, appears as an anomaly or false consciousness. The blues and church are thus counterposed as cultural icons of class division. Perhaps this representation of working-class religion stems from the belief that African-American Christianity is white-derived, middle-class in orientation, and thus less